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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a 1999 study of services to visually impaired users in United Kingdom (U.K.) public libraries. Data were gathered using a mail questionnaire survey of all U.K. public library authorities: 208 in all, of whom 141 responded. Findings are reported in the following areas: (1) information needs; (2) the context of the provision of information services, including campaigns for accessible information, commercial organizations, access technologies, and European Union initiatives; and (3) information provision through U.K. public libraries, including policy statements, budgetary provision, staffing, partnerships, service evaluation, materials provision, library statistics, equipment, provision and access, and promotion. The conclusion discusses issues that impact on public library services, including fragmentation of resources, as well as exclusion and segregation of visually impaired users. (Contains 15 references.) (MES)

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Serving the needs of visually impaired information seekers in UK public libraries

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Services to visually impaired people in the UK: the context

Libraries and disadvantage

Meeting the needs the most disadvantaged in the population has always been a key part of the mission of UK public libraries. It has been estimated that there are around 1.7 million visually impaired people in the UK. (Bruce, McKennell and Walker, 1991). Many are elderly: all face the difficulty of accessing information and enjoying print in a text-dominated world. Of the 354,153 who had actually registered as blind or partially sighted in 1996, from the one million or so entitled to do so, 90% were aged 65 or over. (Brophy, P. and Craven, J., 1999). Many specialist organisations offer library services, including The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), Calibre Library, Talking Newspapers Association (TNAUK) and ClearVision, but public library services have a statutory duty to provide comprehensive and efficient library services to everyone in the community. Public libraries therefore have a primary responsibility to ensure that they meet the library and information needs of all visually impaired people.

Government initiatives

The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, which is now in its final stages of implementation, has acted as a powerful catalyst for change by every service provider in the way that they offer services to individuals with either physical or mental impairment. From October 1999, services were required to make a range

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of policy and procedural changes to help disabled people access their services, with important implications for the delivery of library services.

In order to support library services in developing more effective access for visually impaired people, in 1998 the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) made available a grant of £200,000 through the Library and Information Commission (LIC). The LIC, in partnership with Share the Vision (STV), identified a number of research areas which could better inform, enlighten or empower public library services in meeting visual impairment needs. Share the Vision was set up in 1989 as an RNIB project with grant aid from the Department of National Heritage (forerunner of the DCMS). It later evolved into a partnership company involving the RNIB, the National Library for the Blind, Calibre, TNAUK, the Society of Chief Librarians, the Library Association, the British Library and the Scottish Library and Information Commission. By working with the STV the LIC was therefore able to ensure that the agendas of all the interested professional, charitable and voluntary groups associated with delivering library services to visually impaired individuals were taken account of when defining the research that was required.

The Library and Information Statistics Unit Study, 1999

In order to benchmark UK public library services against international good practice and the recognised standards set out in the Library Association National Guidelines, (Machell, 1996) and to understand if services had moved on since work undertaken in 1985 (Craddock) and the survey undertaken in 1997 by the RNIB. (Chartres, 1998). The Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) at Loughborough University undertook the study at the end of 1999. The research team comprised Professor Margaret Kinnell (Evans), Claire Creaser and Liangzhi Yu (who designed and administered the questionnaire and undertook the literature survey). While the 1999 survey aimed to look broadly at library services to visually impaired users, information provision was obviously a key feature, and will be focused on here.

The data were gathered using a postal questionnaire survey of all UK public library authorities: 208 in all, of whom 141 responded. There was thus a response rate of 67%, with more responses from the English counties (79%) and unitary authorities (70%). This followed extensive consultation, and a survey of the literature. The study was co-ordinated with the other participants in the LIC/STV programme, with questions added in order to support their investigations. A complete account of the study can be found in the final report to the LIC. (Kinnell, Yu and Creaser, 2000). The findings and conclusions of this study now follow:

1. Information needs

Of particular significance is the fact that reading is a key activity for information purposes, even for those with a severe visual impairment. The RNIB statistics have identified about 36% of those who are blind and 75% with partial sight being able to read clear, large print, although around 69% of blind and partially sighted people read less after becoming visually impaired. (Bruce, McKennell and Walker, 1991). It is of concern therefore that reasons for non-reading given in an earlier survey (Bell, 1980) included non-use of libraries, dissatisfaction with the range of materials available and a lack of awareness of opportunities through library services.

There are three clear areas of consensus:

- Visually impaired people do read a great deal for a range of purposes
- There is general dissatisfaction with the range of information/materials available
- Many visually impaired people are not sufficiently aware of the library and information services provided for them.

2. Provision of information services: the context

Wide-ranging provision A considerable problem for the information seeker is that information needs are met by such a wide range of statutory, voluntary and commercial organisations:

- Local authority Social Services Departments

The first access point for those registering their need is the local authority Social Services Department (SSD), which provides information about the welfare of disabled people, including providers of information in alternative formats. Some SSDs provide needs assessments and refer on to appropriate services.

- The RNIB

SSDs refer information seekers to the RNIB or transfer responsibility to public library authorities.

- The NLB, and The Talking Newspaper Association of the UK

(providing 200 titles and the umbrella organisation for 500 local groups) are major additional providers of readily accessible information materials for visually impaired information seekers.

Campaigns for accessible information
In addition to providing their own services, the voluntary sector (RNIB, NLB etc) has been at the forefront of campaigns for accessible information, including:

- See it Right
- Get the Message
- Better Web Design
- Copyright Exemption. (Unlike many other developed countries, the UK does not grant automatic copyright exemptions for producing alternative formats).

Commercial organisations
Commercial organisations, too, have produced significant material, e.g. the BBC and EMI. Information relating to services is also available in non-print formats, e.g. British Telecom offers an enquiry service for visually impaired people through its Talking Pages and a number of banks provide large print or Braille banking information. The Disability Discrimination Act now makes this mandatory on all services, and it is anticipated that information from commercial providers will continue to improve. Monitoring, to ensure this develops effectively will be a major issue.

Access technologies
Access technologies, especially the Kurzweil reading machine and CCTV, have greatly assisted the provision of information in recent years. The most radical change came with the widespread use of computers, when visually impaired people could easily convert print into electronic text and read it from the screen with either transitory Braille or through synthetic speech. It is also possible to

link different converters such as scanners, reading machines, embossers and tape recorders, so that a converted text can be permanently recorded in the desired format. (Gallimore, 1999; Long, 1993; Porter, 1997). The Internet has made it possible for visually impaired people to access information at the same time as sighted users, and has dramatically improved their equality of access, bringing both 'independence and choice - two of the fundamental freedoms'. (Porter, 1997, 36).

EU initiatives
Many initiatives are devoted to exploiting ICT for visually impaired people; detailed information on the following projects from the EU Telematics for the Integration of Disabled and Elderly People (TIDE) programme is available from the RNIB web-site. (RNIB, 1999):

- Access, Information and Navigation support in the Labyrinth of Large Buildings
- Communication and Access to Information for Persons with Special Needs
- Horizontal Action for the Harmonisation of Accessible Structured Documents
- Secure Document Delivery for Blind and Partially Sighted People
- The UK has also been a major contributor to the EU project Testing Systems using Telematics for Library Access for Blind and Visually Handicapped Persons, which investigated how libraries could apply new information and communication technologies in services. A great demand was noted for direct access to library catalogues and models were tested for delivering such catalogues for normal searches and for interlending.

3. Information provision through UK public libraries: the 1999 survey

Policy statements
The proportion of library authorities with an explicit policy statement for visually impaired people (VIP) as a distinct group of information seekers remained low, at 5%. There was some improvement from the 1997 position, if one included policies for all disabled people, which encompassed VIP. Of real concern, though, is the fact that a significant minority (42%) of authorities did not have a written policy statement at all for VIP. Having such a policy statement - or not - made an impact on spending on specialist materials, relationship building with external agencies, and the provision of specialist equipment. Those authorities which had a written policy were more likely to focus on meeting a wider range of these special needs. For example, the 21 authorities with a special policy, or which included this in more general policies for disabled people, provided an average of 9 (out of a total of 22 listed) different special services. Those with a VIP policy incorporated in other areas provided an average of 6 different services. Those with no policy provided an average of 5.

A clear policy statement, which will be shared with staff, members and visually impaired people in the community, is a planning tool, a means of promotion, and a key performance indicator.

Budgetary provision
There was considerable variation in the ways that library services interpreted their services, and consequently in the budgetary allocation. Some had a special budget, when in effect the budget just covered provision of materials in an alternative format (e.g. large print), while others regarded themselves as having a special budget allocation if they covered all services. Most authorities did not have a specific budget allocation for VIP services, and the percentage appeared to have declined slightly since the 1997 survey.

The National Guidelines emphasise that resource allocation for service development is necessary (Machell, 1996,3) but specific guidance to authorities has not been given. This contrasts with guidance given on other important areas of library provision, where there have been recommendations on deploying a percentage of the budget relative to that proportion in the user population. Few authorities were able to provide data on the numbers of visually impaired people who were members of the library, or who lived in their communities. This is clearly unsatisfactory, given that expenditure to support the needs of disabled people and specific groups within the broader category is an important indicator of performance.

Staffing
Several authorities reported staff in more than one category, and some authorities were unable to identify full-time individual posts or staff hours dedicated to VIP services. The result was similar to the 1997 Survey which found that 62% of authorities employed special services staff as a part of a team responsible for VIP services. There was a clear relationship between staffing practices and service levels. More formal contacts and working relationships were achieved with external organisations. It was concerning that one-third of staff had received no basic visual awareness training (a worsening of the position since 1997), and few non-specialist staff were being trained in areas such as the use of assistive technology and equipment.

Partnerships
The percentage of authorities having close, ongoing relationships with other agencies had fallen since 1997. The proportion having no relationships at all with other agencies had also decreased. The pattern that was emerging appeared to be increased but occasional formal contact and referrals from other agencies. Compared with international examples, e.g. the USA (Fitzpatrick, 1990), Denmark, Sweden, there appeared to be poorer coordination and a danger of fragmentation of effort.

Service evaluation
A large minority of 27% (37 authorities) reported not formally evaluating their VIP services and of those who were, some were doing so only as part of a more general evaluation process. Fewer than 20% respondents used the National Guidelines to inform their evaluation, and while users were consulted in some areas, there was little consistency between authorities. Only 40% of authorities held management information on visually impaired users to enable them to contact users on service development and evaluation.

Materials provision
The availability of adult fiction and biography was good, but non-fiction, especially scientific, technical and medical, and reference materials was less so. This was a worrying finding, as it indicated that information provision was generally seen as less of a priority than leisure provision for visually impaired people. Over the last four years, provision of talking books and large print materials as reported in the CIPFA

Library statistics actuals
(CIPFA, 1999) has increased, although the lack of formal policies to inform selection strategies is of concern. The 1999 Survey asked for details of the size of holdings in alternative formats, but fewer than half the respondents were able to supply this information, even for large print and talking books. It was also concerning that 51% did not notify regional library bureaux of their holdings, presumably because there was a lack of policy-making in this area. The

percentage of authorities catering for the minority language needs of their communities appeared to be lower than was the case in the 1997 Survey, in which 50% provided large print and/or spoken word materials. Whether this was due to a lack of availability or to selection decisions was unclear.

Equipment
While it was difficult to assess the levels of equipment required for the user population, it was clear that most authorities had insufficient equipment available, although there were notable improvements in provision since 1997. Even central libraries still had relatively little specialist reading equipment, and rural users had minimal access in smaller branch and mobile libraries. Technology has now made it easier than ever for visually impaired people to access information, and it is essential that public libraries offer the state-of-the-art technology to ensure equality of information provision for all the community.

Provision and access
The take-up of general services by visually impaired people was difficult to ascertain. Services are open to all and are not monitored for their use by visually impaired people. This is an area where a more in-depth follow-up study of users and non-users, to be undertaken by LISU, should help in obtaining more reliable and objective results. Authorities themselves also need to undertake user/non-user surveys on an ongoing basis, as part of effective service management. The data from this Survey did indicate a patchy response to the special requirements of visually impaired people. There was good coverage through housebound services and basic access to buildings (guide dogs allowed, automatic doors). Less consideration had been given to the need for appropriate access through signing and guiding, assistive technology and the design of procedures to enable visually impaired people to join and access information on the same basis as fully sighted people. Special assistance had to be requested from staff.

There was also a concentration of resources in central and main libraries, with rural provision less good.

Promotion
This was not considered to be essential by all authorities, which was of concern. Promotion was largely through personal contact at the Library and through local groups and other agencies. The study did not probe the effectiveness of each method, an aspect that could be usefully developed in further work.

Conclusion: Issues in providing information services

Reading materials and information are thus being provided to visually impaired people by a wide range of organisations, with the voluntary sector remaining as the major player, because of its long-standing commitment in this field. There are three key issues which impact on public library service information provision:

1. Fragmentation

Resources are fragmented across various uncoordinated organisations, each having its own agenda. Visually impaired users may have to contact several organisations to achieve reasonable access to information and materials. The NLB and RNIB partnership is now under way, and the project REVIEL (Resources for Visually Impaired Users of the Electronic Library) (Brophy and Craven, 1999) proposes a nationally accessible library model, but it is still too

early to predict their impact.

2. Exclusion

There is unwitting exclusion of a large proportion of visually impaired people from library and information provision. This is because many organisations, particularly the voluntary sector, largely identify their user group through registration with SSDs or from medical certificates; some also rely on SSDs for referral.

3. Segregation

Provision is largely segregated from the mainstream. This is manifested in the division between the sighted society whose reading and information needs are met by public or academic libraries in an integrated service environment and the visually impaired section of the community whose needs are mainly served by voluntary organisations. This has serious implications for the level (and perhaps quality) of service provided:

- Visually impaired people cannot normally have their needs met by a one-stop contact
- New services developed by the mainstream operation (e.g. learning support) may remain unknown to blind and partially sighted people
- There is over-reliance on voluntary workers' goodwill
- Visually impaired people may not benefit from the professional skills of librarians
- Many libraries had created links with other agencies, but these appeared largely to be for liaison rather than explicit cooperation.

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